

MATING AND MARRIAGE

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trance of the house — three times if there is one door (for the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost), three times before each door if there are two entrances, and once before each door if there are three. The wedding procession goes to church on foot. The men, if they are from the countryside, are stiff, uncomfortable, and hot in their unaccustomed "best" clothing and their often painful shoes, while the women are also self-conscious in their new dresses. The elaborateness of the ceremony varies with the fee paid the priest, but at all events the clanging church bell is heard notifying the town and its environs that a marriage is being consecrated.

If the family of the bride or groom are well known in Mirebalais, a wedding reception may be given at their house for friends of the couple and of their parents, but the real festivities are held after the return to the new family home. As the procession approaches it, the "bush-priest," a functionary who, because of his knowledge of French, can read the prayers of the Church, waits at the gate with two aides, small boys or girls, each with a flag, one red and one white. He has sacred water in one hand and a lighted candle in the other, and as he pours this water on the ground three times he intones the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Credo, and other prayers. These concluded, hymns are sung by all the participants, and singing, a procession is formed with the "bush-priest" in the lead, followed by the flag-bearers, the couple who have just been married, arm in arm, the "godfather" and "godmother" of the marriage, as the witnesses are called, the parents of the bride and groom, and other close relatives. As the procession reaches the door of the house, it pauses and water is thrown on the ground three times; the circuit of the house is made twice again, and each time, as the door is reached, water is thrown, until, the third tour completed, the participants solemnly enter.

There coffee, liqueurs, wine, *kola*, and cakes are served to the principals and the more important members of the com-

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slave, as a "sold *baka*," remained to wreak vengeance upon anyone who dared disturb his charge.

The reality of the *baka* to the Haitian was made dramatically vivid by an incident involving an old blind and deaf horse. It occurred one night on the principal streets of the town of Mirebalais itself. The horse was first noticed as the sun set, groping his way along, and finally circling the turn of the road. Though people shouted at the animal, he would not give way. As darkness came and doors and windows were barred, the horse blundered into the small veranda of a house inhabited by an elderly woman, her daughter, and her grandchildren. The younger woman cried out with fright when, timidly peering about the side of the house, she saw their visitor, but the older woman, whose age made her fearless in the face of this supernatural danger, opened a window and vigorously attacked the animal with a heavy stick, while he unhurriedly tried to get clear of the blows and finally moved on to the next veranda, and so from house to house down the street. On this night the habitual tranquillity did not settle over the town, and all of the next day and many days thereafter there was quiet talk of the danger that had been abroad, and much speculation of its intended destination.

The *baka* are sometimes confused with the *démons*, as is seen in the fragmentary information that was obtained about the existence of secret societies, so feared by Mirebalais folk because of their reputation for working all kinds of evil that it was with difficulty that even the names of two of them could be learned — the "Bisago," whose members appear at night wearing horns and holding candles, and "Les Cochons sans Poils." The former, termed *démons*, are believed to be able to change into animals when they do their evil work, a feat which would seem to make them *baka*. The societies all meet in the open country at night, and each has a small drum. They are called together by the beating of one rock against another in a manner reminiscent of the Zangbeto society of Porto Novo, Dahomey.

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contents, is given by Wirkus, 178-9.

• Compare this description with the *humfort* pictured in Johnston, p. 194.

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It is to be emphasized that in the course of the *vodun* rituals witnessed during this field-work, none of the "frenzy of the blood lust"

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that is so favorite an aspect of these ceremonies with writers of books on Haiti was encountered. As an extreme example of this heightening of the tone with which a ceremony is described, the work of Seabrook may be cited, for phrases such as "blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened" used by him

mark perhaps an all-time record for distortion of the inner discipline of the *vodun* cult.

- Cf. Parsons's brief sketch, (I), 172-3, of a *mangé loi*, though the "bloody anointing" of which she speaks was not seen to occur in Mirebalais *services*. Detailed descriptions of what apparently were *services* are given by Wirkus, 168 ff., who, though honest in recounting what he saw, realized nothing of its significance; and Seabrook (pp. 54-70), who reads so much into what he purports to have witnessed that the entire account is rendered useless.

#### CHAPTER X

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- Compare Parsons (I), 167-72.

- The drunkenness at serious dances reported by Parsons (I), 172, and others, would not be tolerated in Mirebalais.

- Price-Mars (I), 208, gives the name of *assotór* for the great drum.

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- Much nonsense has been written concerning these drums. Many writers — all non-Haitians — stress the existence of a drum language, which seems to be an assertion of dubious truth.

- This is a striking example of what Dorsainvil (I), 73-4 and 131 ff., calls the *masque vòduique* in detailing the effects of possession on the features of the possessed. See also the discussion of possession in Price-Mars (I), 122-3. The Gede possession described by Craige, 73-4, must, on the basis of customary Haitian behavior under possession, be subject to reinterpretation.

- Cf. Parsons (I), 170.

54 *Services for the Loa*

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[202] Then a well-dressed young man entered, and the drummers swiftly changed to the salute reserved for guests of distinction. The hounsi sang, "Président passe là, l'ap monté au gouvernement!" and waved paper flags and kerchiefs. The young man was a distant relative of Stephan's; he also was a houngan.

[516] After a while Stephan brought from his hounfor a second asson, or ritual rattle, and another small hand bell, both of which he handed to the young man. He was extending the courtesy of his hounfor, sharing his instruments of authority and religious power with his fellow houngan. Then followed an exhibition between the two hougans that was half duel and half ballet. They stood face to face, each of them holding the asson in one hand and the tiny bell in the other. Stephan was "testing" the young houngan for the edification of all present. Each tiny move made by Stephan was duplicated simultaneously by his guest, as though he were a mirrored reflection.

Every posture Stephan made was duplicated instantly by his guest. The assons and the bells were agitated constantly. The rattle in the young man's hand did precisely what Stephan's did. The two men looked into each other's eyes with intensity, as though this bound their movements together and unified them. When Stephan twisted to the left, the other houngan twisted to the right. Every contortion of the young man was an exact replica of Stephan's movements. The two assons rattled out the same rhythms and the same signals; so did the bells. The backdrop for this "test" was provided by the drummers. The faces of the two men broke into a sweat from the intense nervous effort. At last it came to an end. A woman came forward and wiped their faces with a colored kerchief. The "testing" ceremony was over. The visiting houngan had been proved.

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[776] Stephan then made a ritual vèdè, or maize-flour ritual drawing on the ground. Afterward there was more singing and dancing by the hounsi. They sang several songs for Ezilie Fréda, the "pure" loa. And Alexis Stephan went into a trance. It was unexpected. The servitors had not prepared for it. In this emergency the visiting houngan took over. He seemed a little anxious. He was unfamiliar with the particular psychological factors at play in this particular hounfor. He was not certain of the character of Stephan's possession. But he took over grimly. The hougénicon, an older woman, stepped forward to help. While the young houngan wielded the asson and bell, the woman issued instructions. Stephan, his head hanging back, his eyes closed, was supported by two of the hounsi. Other servitors hurriedly brought out a white sheet and spread it on the ground. A chair and a table were set upon the sheet, and Stephan was placed in the chair, where he now sat with his head hanging limply on his chest.

[P.112-G]

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9. *Calling the coumbite: signaling on a conch-shell trumpet.*

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10. *A women's coumbite weeding a cornfield near the town of Plaisance.*

## 196 Musical Instruments

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[177] the Haitian word for "twins." They are used primarily for secular music of the Cuban type, and may in fact be an importation from Cuba. The marassa is one of the few drums on which a finger technique is used; that is, striking with individual fingers rather than with grouped fingers. Marassas are often played in concert with guitars and marimbas.

The *basse* is the shallow finger drum resembling what in the United States is called the tambourine. Constructed in the pattern of an African prototype, its head is usually fifteen or eighteen inches in diameter and made of goatskin. Small metal disks sometimes are inserted in the frame to act as rattles. The head is kept well coated with resin or beeswax and is tapped and rubbed with the fingers. The *basse* is used only for secular music, except in the rare instances when it is used in Congo services. Some Haitians believe that the name of the instrument comes from the word *Basque*.

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202 It is reported that signal drums were still in use a decade ago in remote sections of the southwestern peninsula. One of these instruments, according to description, is distinguished mainly by its large belly and small mouth; like the Juba drum, it is played on its side. Another style of signal drum has a slit in the side and is played erect, much like an African slit-log drum standing on end.

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[171] Another percussion instrument is the bamboo stamping tube, called the *ganbo* or *ti kanmbo*. It is African in origin and probably takes its name from the Loango term for the same device, *dikanmbo*.<sup>2</sup> The stamping tube is simply a length of bamboo, open at one end and closed at the other by a natural joint membrane. The closed end is struck sharply upon the ground, and the tone comes from the open top. The device works like an inverted drum, the closed end functioning like a drumhead. A battery of four or five ganbos may provide the percussion music otherwise played by drums. The musician corresponding to the *bulatier* of the drum orchestra plays two small stamping tubes, one in each hand. The other musicians have one each, thicker and longer than the *bulatier*'s and producing deeper tones. Cupped hands are manipulated over the open ends for varying the sounds. This instrument has survived in various parts of the New World where Africans were settled, particularly other West Indian islands, Brazil, and Venezuela. In Venezuela the stamping tubes are called *quitiplas*.<sup>3</sup> They have recently been reported from various areas of West Africa, including French Equatorial Africa.<sup>4</sup>

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798 The ganbos had a singular burst of popularity in Haiti during the United States military occupation of the country after the first World War, when drums were often seized and destroyed. Drums could not

(115) <sup>2</sup> [Informant: Joseph Lengó, Brazzaville. Cf. P.354, Category 116. -- Analyst]  
<sup>3</sup> [Library of Congress album, Folk Music of Venezuela. Cf. P.354, Category 116. -- Analyst]  
<sup>4</sup> [Pamphlet accompanying recording, Music of Equatorial Africa (New York: Folkways Library, 1950). Cf. P.354, Cat. 116. -- Analyst]

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easily be hidden, but the ganbos were simply slipped into the straw roofs and thus put out of sight. Moreover, by some strange process of reasoning, military authorities regarded the bamboos as "harmless," though they were used for the same purposes as the contraband drums. 534  
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There are numerous other kinds of simple percussion devices. One such instrument, now less commonly seen than previously, is a length of open bamboo laid in the crotches of two Y-shaped sticks set in the ground. Like other *catas*, the bamboo is beaten with two sticks. Some Haitians believe that in former days such bamboos were played in batteries like a xylophone. 534

Sometimes a light-weight wooden cylinder, or perhaps a drum denuded of its playing head, is carried by the timekeeper of a coumbite. It, also, is played on the side with sticks. [461]  
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Wooden mortars for pulverizing grain take on the character of musical instruments when used in combination with voices. When two or more mortars are used, with two men or women wielding the long polelike pestles in each mortar, the rhythmic effects can become fairly complicated. 534  
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The *claves* or *palos* (small hardwood sticks) are used primarily in connection with secular dances of a Cuban type, or to accompany such instruments as the guitar and the marimba. One stick is held loosely in the natural fold of the hand, so that it is free to vibrate, and is struck sharply with the second stick. The tone is almost metallic because of the hardness of the wood, usually *lignum vitae*. The name of the instrument is recognizable as a form of *clavar*, or *clavo*, Spanish for "peg" or "nail." It is thought that wooden shipbuilding pegs provided the name for this device, which has equivalents in West Africa. 534  
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Among the folk instruments there are various kinds of horns and trumpets. Cows' horns are played musically in some parts of the southern peninsula, though usually they are used as ritual instruments and signaling devices. Wooden trumpets called *pistons* are carved from the stems of the papaya tree. Conch-shell trumpets, known as *lambis*, are commonly used as signaling devices by fishermen. They are also to be found among the coumbites, in Rara festivities, and occasionally in rituals, where they are usually identified with sea deities. In carnival times the old fashioned phonograph horn makes its appearance as a combined trumpet and voice amplifier. 534  
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Probably the most important of the trumpets is the one made of bamboo. It is called a *vaccine* or *bois bourrique*. Both names have interesting origins. The cow's horn was at one time used for magical-medical purposes. The leaf doctor used it as an "applicator" of powders and potions. A small opening was made in the point of the horn, and a [See plate 8, p. 112-F. -- Analyst] 534  
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## VODUN

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learn the properties of plants, both for healing and for poison. Except for the belief in spiritual beings, this folk knowledge would hardly have been classed as religious, for it was useful in every phase of daily life; the classification is that of the anthropologist, not of the simple black.

If Dahomean beliefs prevailed over others of African origin, it was chiefly because of the numerical preponderance of Dahomeans in the colony, together with the popularity of their religious dances. The Dahomean spirits or gods were Vodun; the dance in which the worshiper sought the inspiration of the spirits was a Vodun dance. Like all but the highly organized religions, this one recognized the validity of other beliefs. Its practitioners were not bigots. No hierarchy existed to keep out new accretions. Imperceptibly these were added to the original basic form: here an Arada spirit, there a Congolese prayer, and in many instances a Catholic saint, until the composite Vodun religion began to take shape.

There is no evidence that during colonial times Vodun was ever considered important by the white ruling class—certainly not as a faith. To most planters the word was the name for a vigorous dance. Judging from Moreau de Saint-Méry's description it was held openly enough, at times being witnessed by the whites as a sort of nocturnal diversion. Moreau knew, as did other whites, that there were "superstitious beliefs" connected with it, yet the offhand use of the word "superstition" was indication enough that the beliefs were not regarded as important. We have seen, however, what profitable use the slaves were able to make of the apparent innocence of their dances. When the idea of revolt began to germinate among them, gathering on each plantation at least once a week they had ample opportunity to hatch their plans. It is known that the campaign for revolt was developed partly under the stimulus of the Negro Boukman, a *houngan* or priest of Vodun. By means of drumbeats, which to the whites merely pounded out the rhythm for dancing but had for centuries been a means of communication at long distance in parts of West Africa, that ripening plot was telegraphed from one plantation to another. Even more important, perhaps, was the unity of feeling made possible, despite all incoherence of tradition and language, by the Vodun background.

The revolt of half a million slaves was a success. This fact has been rather too calmly accepted by historians of Saint-Domingue, who

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